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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 TEL AVIV 002324

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TAGS: [IS KMDR MEDIA REACTION REPORT](#)
SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

Mideast

Key stories in the media:

Jerusalem Post quoted senior Israeli diplomatic officials as saying that the U.S. is "watering down" assurances President Bush gave PM Sharon, less than a week after the two met in Washington. The newspaper quoted the officials as saying that as a result of pressure on Washington from the Arab world and Europe, Secretary of State Colin Powell has played down Bush's

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ideas about the shape of the final-status deal. Ha'aretz and Israel Radio quoted Bush as saying Wednesday, in a speech to the Newspaper Association of America Annual Convention, that a "free Palestinian state would be a major change agent for world peace." Bush remarked that "the whole world should have said, thank you Ariel," for the withdrawal plan. Bush added: "The Palestinian leadership has failed the people year after year after year." Israel Radio quoted Sharon as saying this morning before the Knesset plenum that Bush told him that he completely supports the disengagement plan. Sharon was also quoted as saying that the U.S. backing of Israeli disengagement is "unprecedented," that whoever wants to hold on to settlement blocs -- an achievement reached during his visit to Washington -- must back a pullout, and that he will bring his plan for approval to the Knesset after the cabinet ratifies it. Sharon said that the negative Palestinian response was a confirmation of the validity of his move. The radio noted that in his remarks Sharon hinted that he does not consider the Likud referendum as binding. Labor Party Chairman Shimon Peres said that his faction -- preferably not as a coalition member -- would support the plan.

The media reported that Wednesday in the northern Gaza Strip, a total of nine Palestinians were killed in clashes with the IDF and that at least 40 were wounded. This morning reported that three armed senior Tanzim militants were killed near Tulkarm, West Bank. Israel Radio reported that last night PA Chairman Yasser Arafat, as Israel was about to attack his Ramallah HQ (according to his aides), expelled 21 Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades activists who had been hiding there for the past two months.

Ha'aretz and Hatzofe reported that Sharon associates are urging him to cancel the Likud referendum on his withdrawal plan, since its results are foreknown. Ha'aretz quoted opponents of the plan in the party as saying that those attempts are actually due to the decline in the party members' support for the plan.

Israel Radio quoted Ambassador J. Cofer Black, the State Department Coordinator for Counterterrorism, as saying, in a testimony before a Senate subcommittee, that the assassination of the Hamas leaders has disrupted the group's activity and greatly influenced Palestinian society. He was also quoted as saying that it is too early to say whether the assassinations will influence Hamas's ability to strike at Israel.

Israel Radio reported that Palestinian PM Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala) called on Bush to retract his declaration that, in a final-status agreement, Israel will not have to withdraw from the entire West Bank and that it will

not have to take in Palestinian refugees.

All media continued to highlight the release of nuclear whistleblower Mordechai Vanunu. (Both Yediot and Maariv devoted their first 11 pages to the topic.)

All media reported that, at a press conference in Tel Aviv Wednesday, U.S. Ambassador Dan Kurtzer and U.S. Consul-General in Tel Aviv Phil Covington announced that the Embassy will ease visa restrictions for Israelis born in countries classified as sponsors of terror, including Iran, Syria, Libya, Sudan, North Korea and Cuba. Ha'aretz quoted Kurtzer as saying: "We in the Embassy have been working with Washington for almost two and a half years to see this change." The media quoted Covington as saying that the changes do not apply only to Israelis, but that they were made primarily out of concern for Israeli travelers who left their birthplace at least 50 years ago.

Yediot reported that in June El Al is to fit its first plane with a protection system against shoulder-launched missiles. The system was developed by Israel Aircraft Industries (IAI) and Israel Military Industries.

Citing AP, Ha'aretz reported that the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) announced that it would renew shipments to the Gaza Strip after reaching an arrangement with Israeli security.

Israel Radio reported that, at the request of Arafat, Malaysia is convening a meeting of the Islamic Organization Conference (IOC) to discuss the United States' support for Israel and its policy in Iraq. The radio notes that only one third of the member states have sent delegates -- most of them under ministerial level -- to the meeting.

All media reported that UEFA, European soccer's governing body, lifted its ban on playing international games in Israel, saying it is satisfied with the country's security arrangements.

All media reported that Wednesday four people were wounded in the bombing of the old Saudi General Security building housing offices of the Interior Ministry in Riyadh. Ha'aretz noted that Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage was in Riyadh for

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talks Wednesday.

A Dialogue poll for Ha'aretz (also cited in Maariv and Yediot) found that the gap between supporters and opponents of Sharon's disengagement plan in the Likud is narrowing: 44 percent support it, while 40 percent are opposed; 11 percent are undecided. Maariv and Yediot say that internal Likud polls and other surveys confirm the trend.

Mideast:

Summary:

Diplomatic correspondent Aluf Benn wrote in independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz: "This is an election year in the United States, and it's a convenient time for Israel to establish more facts on the ground. But even within these restrictions, Bush is doing more for the Palestinians than did any of his predecessors."

Middle East affairs commentator Guy Bechor, a lecturer at the Interdisciplinary Center, wrote in mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: "We still have a paramount interest to disengage from Gaza, but to disengage for real.... Let their Arab brethren take care of the Palestinians."

Block Quotes:

I. "A U.S. 'Trusteeship' For the Palestinians"

Diplomatic correspondent Aluf Benn wrote in independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz (April 22): "The United States appointed itself in the past year as the governess of the Palestinians and the guardian of their rights, as the custodian of a future Palestinian state.

The same Bush who is considered an enthusiastic supporter of Sharon, who backs every assassination and every Israeli military action in the territories, has quietly created an American "trusteeship" for the Palestinians. Bush was the first president to call for the establishment of a Palestinian state, and he is trying to fill his words with substance.... There are several expressions of this American trusteeship, which were mentioned in Bush's letter to Sharon and in accompanying documents. The most important of them is the preservation of reserves of land for a Palestinian state in the West Bank, which will enjoy reasonable territorial contiguity.... [For his part,] Sharon has evaded most of his promises until now.... This is an election year in the United States, and it's a convenient time for Israel to establish more facts on the ground. But even within these restrictions, Bush is doing more for the Palestinians than did any of his predecessors."

II. "Beware of the Gaza 'Conception'"

Middle East affairs commentator Guy Bechor, a lecturer at the Interdisciplinary Center, wrote in mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (March 4): "Now that Hamas has become such a central element in the Gaza Strip, because of the two most recent assassinations, we must not allow ourselves to be fooled by our own illusions, such as the ones about Muhammad Dahlan, that have cropped up among the dreamers of Oslo. Dahlan is Arafat, and neither of them have any reason to make Israel's life easier. And the Hamas leaders will not suddenly become lovers of Zion and reduce the volume of terrorism. We still have a paramount interest to disengage from Gaza, but to disengage for real. To wit, to seal the crossings between Israel and the Gaza Strip for good, to stop supplying electricity and water, and to evacuate in tandem the Philadelphia road that runs between the Gaza Strip and Egypt. Let their Arab brethren take care of the Palestinians. Only Egypt, when it bears sole responsibility for the only exit from the Gaza to the world, will know how to cope with Hamas. If weapons are smuggled into the Gaza Strip after that, there will be no doubt as to who is responsible for it and where that responsible party is."

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